



Photography by Dana McReynolds

# Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge

## A Way To Preserve This Precious Ecosystem

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**W**hen you think of the Alabama state tree, the longleaf pine, you probably think of an evergreen flourishing in the coastal plain region of the state. True, longleaf pines usually thrive in the hot and humid climate of south Alabama, but these pines also exist in the mountains. These mountain-inhabitant trees are most commonly referred to as mountain or “montane” longleaf pines. These pines currently exist on shallow, rocky soils in the southern stretch of the Blue Ridge and the Ridge and Valley regions of Alabama, the lower end of the Appalachian Mountains.

At one time, the range of both coastal plain longleaf pines and mountain longleaf pines expanded from Virginia to Texas, encompassing 92 million acres. Today, only three percent (approximately 3 million acres) of longleaf pines remain. Of these two longleaf species, the mountain longleaf pine inhabits even fewer acres. The main concentration of mountain longleaf pines in Alabama occurs in areas of the Talladega National Forest, Fort McClellan National Wildlife Refuge, Cheaha State Park, and Oak Mountain State Park.

Many theories are discussed as to why the mountain longleaf pines still exist in

certain areas of Alabama. The generally accepted theory is the continuous use of fire. Before the settlers came, the native people living in the region hundreds of years ago incorporated burning in their hunting and horticultural practices. The fires suppressed woody competition in the understory and induced the growth of grasses, asters, forbs and legumes that were very beneficial to wildlife. Because longleaf pines are so well adapted to fire, the frequent occurrence of it ultimately encouraged the growth of these stands. Another profound explanation as to why mountain longleaf pines was preserved in this area is because the very nature itself



of the mountainous region isolated it from the practice of agriculture by the settlers. Thinning these stands has also been important in maintaining the health of this ecosystem. Both thinning and burning are necessary for seed germination and pine regeneration.

This ecosystem is one of the most bio-diverse forest systems in the United States, and despite the decline in area, many different plant and animal species thrive in this forest setting. Whitetail deer, bobwhite quail, and plants such as ferns and wiregrass are all inhabitants of the mountain longleaf pine community. The decreased acreage has prompted over 30 plant and animal species to be endangered or threatened, including the gopher tortoise, the red cockaded woodpecker, and the Indiana bat. Now, this ecosystem must rely on the co-existence of its current plants and animals for diversity. Without proper continuous management, this unique forest type will be gone forever.

Public awareness grew because of the uniqueness and historical value of the area, and the community voiced interest in preservation of the mountain longleaf pine ecosystem. By the 1990's, action was being taken to support public demand. Of the predominant areas in Alabama that contain this forest type, Fort McClellan was chosen as the area to preserve. Before September 30, 1999, Fort McClellan used its natural forestland as a military training base and firing range. The unintentional fires caused by artillery training inadvertently preserved



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the unfragmented forest containing 250-year-old mountain longleaf pines. When the military base closed and training ceased in 1999, so did the fires. If the occurrences of fire desist entirely, the result could be the loss of this precious ecosystem.

To prevent this inevitable situation, prominent citizens and local dignitaries lobbied politicians to maintain this old growth forest with its beautiful vistas and rugged landscape. Through the successful negotiating and legislative efforts of Senator Jeff Sessions, the Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge (MSNWR) was dedicated on June 1, 2003. The property combined 7,759 acres of Army land (Fort McClellan) and 1,250

acres of the Joint Powers Authority land and was transferred to the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Although it was the 542nd refuge in the United States, it was the first mountain refuge established in the Southeast. The significance of establishing the new wildlife refuge in 2003 is that America celebrated 100 years of wildlife and habitat conservation in that year: the National Wildlife Refuge System was launched in 1903 by President Theodore Roosevelt.

In addition to preserving the ecosystem of diverse fauna and flora, the refuge is to perpetuate species of neo-tropical migratory birds. Special emphasis will be given to the red-cockaded woodpecker and other endangered and threatened species. Finally, the refuge will provide recreational opportunities, wildlife observation, environmental education, and ecosystem interpretation.

Presently, the Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge is closed to the public. It will remain closed until the army completes clean up requirements and determines that no unexploded ordnance contamination exists from former military training. The Longleaf Alliance conducted a specially scheduled field tour of this newly established refuge during their October 2003 Conference. Like attendees of that conference, soon everyone will be able to view Alabama's mesmerizing mountain longleaf pine forest and enjoy the spectacular beauty it provides. 🌲

## Resources:

<http://www.jsu.edu/depart/epic/longleafpine.html>

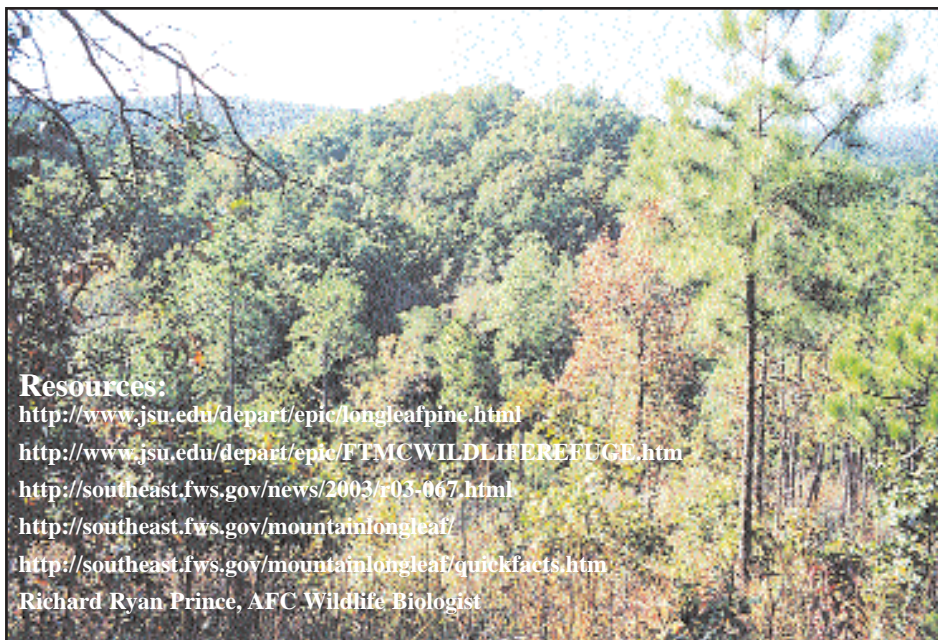
<http://www.jsu.edu/depart/epic/FTMCWILDLIFEREFUGE.htm>

<http://southeast.fws.gov/news/2003/r03-067.html>

<http://southeast.fws.gov/mountainlongleaf/>

<http://southeast.fws.gov/mountainlongleaf/quickfacts.htm>

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